

An open-air prison confronts the global crisis



With no working constitution, functioning parliament, independent judiciary, free press, bureaucratic accountability or officially published national budget, Eritrea, the most militarized country in the world, lacks the mechanisms required to tackle the current global crisis. The shrinking global economy has drained remittances to Eritrea, while prices of food and fuel have skyrocketed. The country needs an immediate transition to a democratic system of governance that has the support of the international community. Humanitarian aid monitored by independent international NGOs appears to be the most effective emergency plan to save the lives of helpless Eritreans.

Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights (EMDHR)

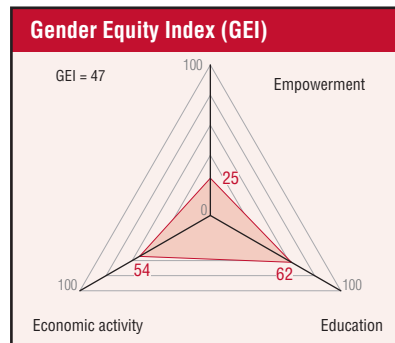
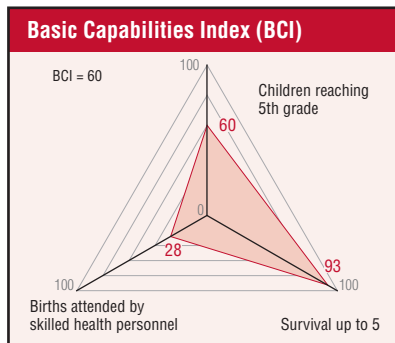
Daniel R Mekonnen

Long before the global financial crisis became acute in late 2008, Eritrea was already in a deep economic, social and political mess of its own making. The country has one of the poorest records of human rights protection in the world, as attested by regional and international human rights monitoring bodies, including the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. The human rights crisis worsened after the 1998-2000 border conflict with Ethiopia, since then the Government has used the repercussions of the conflict as a pretext to suppress fundamental rights and freedoms.

An open-air prison

An independent state since 1991, Eritrea has yet to offer its citizens true freedom. In fact, conventional features of a free and democratic government are barely visible.¹ Virtually all countries in the world have an enforceable national constitution, and most also have functioning parliaments. They conduct regular and periodic elections, irrespective of whether they are free or fair in real terms. They allow private media outlets, even if regulations become so restrictive that they give zero freedom to the press. In Eritrea, the Government adopted a Constitution in 1997, but has never implemented it. The nominal parliament ceased functioning in February 2002. Private media (radio, TV, print and electronic) disappeared between 1997 and 2001; only Government-owned outlets remain, and their allegiance has always been to the ruling elite rather than to the truth. Worst of all, since it gained independence, the country has never enjoyed free and fair elections.

Today, as bread queues spread in the streets of Asmara, the capital city, life has become extremely difficult for Eritreans. Like the former occupation authorities of the Derg (a coordinating committee of the armed forces, police and territorial army) in the 1970s, the Government seems to have declared



war against its own people. Today, a common adage among Eritreans is that the only difference between the Derg regime and the current rule of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) is that the officials of the Derg used to speak in Amharic (the Ethiopian official language) while the PFDJ officials converse in Tigrinya, a vernacular dialect with *de facto* official status.

Individuals who do not subscribe to state ideology or followers of religious beliefs not officially sanctioned by the Government are systematically targeted and severely punished by the security and military apparatus. As a result, human rights violations are rampant; violation is the norm and protection the exception. Some conservative estimates suggest that more than 20,000 people are in detention without trial or any contact with the outside in more than 300 formal and informal sites all over the country. Most of these sites are administered by army generals, who are not accountable to either the police or ordinary courts. In short, the country has been transformed into an open-air prison where all fundamental rights and freedoms are completely muzzled by nightmarish, Kafkaesque, pervasive and abusive practices.

Social and development indicators

Developments indicators are contradictory. Reports from some sources indicate "progress" in certain areas, such as infant mortality and maternal morbidity. However, the extremely repressive political atmosphere and the impossibility of obtaining reliable data make it difficult to take these accounts at face value. In truth, the flawed economic policies of the authoritarian PFDJ totally depleted the national and local economies long before the global financial crisis hit in late 2008.

Many reports from independent sources rank Eritrea miserably. For example, the Global Hunger Index puts Eritrea third from the bottom, 116th among the 118 countries assessed by the report.² The country receives critical grades on the Basic Capabilities Index, denoting serious difficulties in every dimension of social development.³ In press freedom, Eritrea is ranked worst in the world, replacing North Korea, according to Reporters without Borders.⁴ Despite its small population of four million, the country's alarming record of human rights violations has caused it to be ranked as the fourth largest source of refugees in the world. The 19,400 new claims during 2005-2006 place it just above the failed or chaotic states of Somalia, Iraq and Zimbabwe.⁵

The most militarized country

Excessive militarization is another major evil. High school students are forced to enrol in military camps for "formal education". Among them is the notorious Sawa Military Training Camp, where the students are disciplined under strict martial rule. The abusive National Military Service Programme (NMSP), which starts at the age of eighteen and ends nowhere, continues this preparatory stage of indoctrination.

1 See Mekonnen, D.R. (2008). 'Transitional Justice: Framing a Model for Eritrea', unpublished LLD thesis, University of the Free State.

2 Welt Hunger Ilfe (2007). *The Challenge of Hunger 2007*. Available from: <www.welthungerhilfe.de/fileadmin/media/pdf/Pressemitteilungen/DWHH_GHI_english.pdf>. Accessed 4 January 2008

3 *Social Watch Report 2008*.

4 Reporters without Borders (2007). *Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index*. Available from: <www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24025>. Accessed 16 October 2007.

5 UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (2007). *Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons*. Geneva. Available from: <www.unhcr.dk/Pdf/statistics/global_trends_2006.pdf>.

The numerous abhorrent violations of human rights perpetrated under the NMSP include rape and other sexual violence against female conscripts. In recent years, military commanders have been in effective control of all senior academic institutions. In 2003, the country ranked as the most militarized state in the world and third highest, after North Korea and Angola, in percentage of Gross National Product going to the military.⁶ By mid-2000, Eritrea military had 300,000 people in its ranks, more than at any other time in its history. Since then the number of personnel is believed to have increased exponentially. Female conscripts make up 45.27% of the total national army, and their vulnerability is proportional to their number.

The country's pervasive crisis has been exacerbated by the shrinking global economy, which has choked off remittances from abroad. The cost of food and fuel has skyrocketed. Prices at fuel pumps, strictly regulated by the Government, are said to be the highest in the world. Actually, fuel is hardly available. Food can be purchased legally only at Government-owned outlets, and farmers have to sell their grain to these stores at a fixed price. Sale of grain in local markets has been effectively criminalized, as the President himself stated in an extensive media briefing in January 2009.

Governmental response

The Government categorically dismisses reports of economic deprivation, as well as reports on political repression, as "enemy propaganda". In fact, the President quipped that accounts of pervasive economic hardship represent nothing more than the frustrations of "overfed and spoil people" who do not know how to spend their resources. In reality, people are literally dying on their knees of hunger – in a famine caused by the PFDJ. With no working constitution, functioning parliament, independent judiciary, free press, bureaucratic accountability or even an officially published national budget, Eritrea acutely lacks the legislative, administrative and institutional mechanisms required to respond to the current global crisis. Moreover, traditional mechanisms for coping with crises such as emigration are hardly available. Under the suffocating martial law, exit and entry points are closed tight. After depleting whatever meagre resources they may have, the starving masses, particularly women, the elderly and children, are unable to go anywhere and have to resign themselves to dying in their villages. The Government has yet to adopt any programmes to protect the most vulnerable population.

GONGOs (Government-operated NGOs)

A sound development agenda driven by a rights-based approach gives strategic preference to empowerment of local communities and accountability. This approach endows people with the power and capacity to become the major actors in their own lives. One way to achieve this is through the involvement of independent civil society organizations and local NGOs representing the interests of their communities. Sadly, the repressive atmosphere renders impossible the work of independent civil society. The country has only three active local organizations engaged in the national development agenda purported to benefit the general population: the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW), the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) and the National Confederation of Eritrean Workers (NCEW). Other "civil society organizations" are timorous and exist in name only.

Even the three active organizations are not genuine or independent enough to represent the interests of their constituencies, as is widely known. They function as the women's, the youth's and the workers' leagues (branches) of the ruling party, which picks their leaders and commands their allegiance. In other words, they are typical examples of Government-operated NGOs (GONGOs), designed to conceal the country's dependency on foreign aid and pay lip service to civil society participation.⁷ The only independent civil society organizations, such as the Eritrean Movement for Democracy and Human Rights, work in exile, excoriated by the Government as "enemy stooges"; if caught inside the country, their members are jailed and tortured.

International cooperation

International cooperation is crucial in resolving the multiple global crises disproportionately scourging people in developing countries. For many years, Eritrea's food deficit has been covered by food aid donated by the international community (although the Government does not acknowledge this). International aid organizations and NGOs have played a pivotal role in this regard. Nonetheless, many of them were expelled as a result of the Government's illusory policy of "self reliance". When not refusing food aid, the Government makes it difficult for this assistance to enter into the country. It prefers international aid in the form of cash.

The European Union (EU) remains one of the leading international providers of food and development aid to Eritrea. It is currently debating the release of development aid worth EUR 122 million (about USD 161 million) from the 10th European Develop-

ment Fund, but has legitimate concerns regarding the Eritrean Government's contempt for the legal requirements attached to any responsible development aid plan. These include commitment to the principles of good governance, accountability, and respect for human rights and the rule of law, none of which exist in Eritrea. The country has neither the political will nor the means to ensure a genuine development policy, and lacks a transparent decision-making process for formulating and implementing state policies to overcome the current global crisis.

Eritrea needs an immediate transition to a democratic system of governance that has the support of the international community. Until that occurs, humanitarian aid monitored by independent international NGOs appears to be the most effective emergency approach to saving the lives of the helpless population, suffocated by severe political repression as well as an economic meltdown. ■

References

- Awate Team (2003). Defending Indefensible, Indulging Incompetence. Available from: <www.unhcr.dk/Pdf/statistics/global_trends_2006.pdf>.
- Mekonnen, D.R. (2008). 'Transitional Justice: Framing a Model for Eritrea', unpublished LLD thesis, University of the Free State.
- Mekonnen, D.R. (2007). 'The Abolition of Female Circumcision in Eritrea: Inadequacies of New Legislation', *African Human Rights Law Journal* 7(2): 407-08.
- Office of the High Commission for Human Rights. 'Human Rights in Development: Rights-Based Approaches'. Geneva. Available from: <www.unhcr.ch/development/approaches-04.html>. Accessed 17 March 2009.
- Reporters without Borders (2007). *Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index*. Available from: <www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=24025>. Accessed 16 October 2007.
- UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) (2007). *Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons*. Geneva. Available from: <www.unhcr.dk/Pdf/statistics/global_trends_2006.pdf>.
- UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCHR) (2002). 'Human Rights in Development: Rights-Based Approaches'. Available from: <www.unhcr.ch/development/approaches-04.html>. Accessed 17 March 2009.
- Welt Hunger Hilfe (2007). *The Challenge of Hunger 2007*. Available from: <www.welthungerhilfe.de/fileadmin/media/pdf/Pressemitteilungen/DWHH_GHI_english.pdf>. Accessed 4 January 2008.

6 Awate Team (2003). Defending Indefensible, Indulging Incompetence. Available from: <www.unhcr.dk/Pdf/statistics/global_trends_2006.pdf>.

7 For further discussion on this see Daniel R. Mekonnen 'The Abolition of Female Circumcision in Eritrea: Inadequacies of New Legislation'. *African Human Rights Law Journal* 2007 7(2): 407-408.